

A New Model of Transportation Service for Students with Disabilities

Districts can help students with disabilities progress to a more independent level of bus service.

By Pete Meslin



With tighter education budgets for support services, some districts must consider other means of providing transportation service for students with disabilities.

Some districts have used creative strategies, such as optimizing class locations, sharing service with other districts, using other modes of transportation, and consulting transportation staff when deciding student class placements. All these strategies are laudable, but they are not the only options.

With the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's increased emphasis on serving students in the least restrictive environment, we have an opportunity to expand our role from focusing almost exclusively on providing safe student access to the education program to providing opportunities for students to learn life skills. We may thus be able to reduce the need for the curbside bus stops for special-needs students.

If we can teach students with special emotional, mental, and learning needs the skills necessary to ride the same buses as their nondisabled peers, special transportation may eventually be unnecessary as a related—and very costly—service. That is, if students can access the education program in the same manner as their nondisabled peers, they will no longer require special-education bus service.

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Granted, many students will be unable to develop to that point. However, if we have high expectations, the tools necessary to measure progress, and the appropriate lessons, many students will be able to progress to a less restrictive transportation setting.

Educators deal with standards. They establish lessons to help students reach progressively more advanced goals. When a student does not perform at expected levels, the teacher develops an intervention strategy. If we apply this approach to transportation, a different concept of school bus service emerges.

If we expect students with disabilities to progress to a more independent level of bus service, we start with high expectations for these students. If they do not progress as expected, we give them more intensive instruction. For this new transportation paradigm to succeed, we must be able to offer increasingly more independent

Table 1. Sample Independent Skills Matrix

Program	Pre-K & K	1st–3rd	4th–6th	7th–9th	10th–12th
Mild/moderate special day class	Curbside	Transitional	Transitional	Centralized	No service
Moderate/severe special day class	Curbside	Curbside	Curbside	Transitional	Transitional

levels of bus service that correspond to the students' levels of skills mastery.

The Transitional Bus Stop

At a minimum, we hope that most of our students with special needs could eventually wait for the school bus at the corner rather than in their homes. We might have to establish transitional bus stops for these students, but even if the stops are at the closest corner, the students will be practicing skills that they don't learn with curbside service. As we move the transitional stops farther from the students' homes, they learn how to navigate their communities safely.

In addition to helping them become more independent, this model has significant cost implications, as we can reduce route length and potentially eliminate entire routes. We can serve these students on larger buses and shorten the routes.

The progression continues as students learn more socialization skills and receive bus service at the neighborhood stop with their nondisabled peers. The "special-ed. bus" becomes unnecessary for the students who have mastered skills to this level of independence.

The combination of fewer stops, more students at clustered stops, and more direct routes is an option for school business administrators to reflect on. When the educational benefits to student life skills are considered as well, this new independence-focused model of transportation as a related service becomes imperative.

The Independence Matrix

Every special-education program should have transportation independence standards. Obviously, not all students will be capable of achieving or surpassing these targets. However, if educators have standards for every program, they can customize lesson plans and intervention strategies. An excerpt from a skills matrix (Table 1) shows a typical set of bus service expectations for students in two different special day class programs.

Variables like geography, climate, and equipment will certainly require a different level of service in certain locations. Nevertheless, by focusing on student abilities instead of disabilities, we establish the expectation that all students can learn new skills and progress. Whether a specific student masters the skills to receive a more independent level of bus service depends, of course, on that student's abilities and the effectiveness of the instruction.

Skills Checklist

Transportation departments seldom have the opportunity to provide input into classroom practices. At the same time, teachers do not always have the tools to teach transportation-related skills. Without an organized list of skills required at each level of service, the academic process cannot succeed. By using a checklist, teachers can verify that skills have been mastered before students can safely progress to the next level of transportation service.

At the most restrictive level of service—curbside—students are taught basic transportation-related skills like presenting a bus pass and greeting the driver. They also learn to follow the bus driver's instructions and observe bus rules. Once these skills, and perhaps a few more, have been mastered, the student is ready for the next level of service—a transitional bus stop.

A skills checklist and independence matrix add more tools to this budget efficiency toolbox. More significantly, this model of service adds a tool into the education toolbox. We can do more for students educationally and do more for the budget in the process.

At each level of service, the skills checklist offers a set of associated skills (and a bank of sample goals for individualized education programs). The checklist allows educators, parents, and administrators to assess student progress toward transportation independence expectations and standards. Teachers will need to create lesson plans, set goals for individualized education programs, and devise appropriate intervention strategies. Teachers can also use the checklist when discussing student progress with parents. These are all processes in which educators have expertise. In fact, educators use this model to help ensure student progress in almost every academic area.

Implications

As educators implement this model, transportation service actually becomes part of the education process. Not only do school buses safely deliver students to school ready to learn, they deliver students who have learned on the way to school.

By changing the way we think about transportation, we can reduce routes, improve service, and teach students life skills.

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